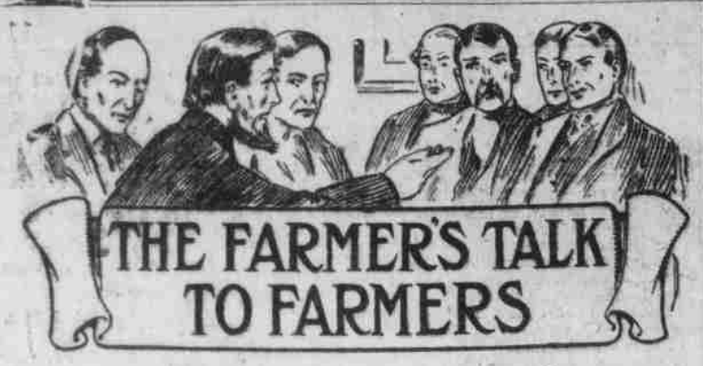

THE FARMER'S TALK TO FARMERS

CULTIVATION AS NECESSARY AS FERTILIZATION

(Written Specially for The Bulletin.)

The tillage question ranks in farm importance next to the manure problem.

The more fertilizer or manure we put on our fields—within reason, of course—the more things grow. Including weeds. Nature is very impartial in the distribution of her sub-soil favors. She seems just as willing to foster weeds as grains; just as ready to feed their greedy little suckers as the rootlets of useful plants. She seems quite as well satisfied with a ground-matting crop of pusley as with a basket-filling one of onions or corn.

Sometimes I think she's fonder of weeds than of vegetables. You know it often happens that the worst scapegrace in the family is "mother's boy," actually loved more tenderly than his deserving brothers. There's a good deal of the externally inexplicable feminine about Old Lady Nature.

I notice that she doesn't produce cabbages nor potatoes nor lettuce nor asparagus on my gardens, unless I fix the soil up very cunningly and fertilize it very generously and cultivate it very laboriously, and generally monkey with it, day in and day out. Even then she often treats these friends of mine quite coldly and as if she didn't half like 'em. But let her alone and she'll cover those gardens with pigweed and pusley and shepherd's purse and a score of other weeds that are of no use to man or beast. She'll put her whole heart into that sort of thing, and will do a job that plainly outclasses almost anything we can cajole her into doing with our crops.

And the more manure we put upon or into our soils for the sake of helping our plants, the more cunningly she'll swipe a big three-quarters of it to feed her blamed weeds—if we'll let her.

That's where cultivation comes in. Not that the only nor even the most important function of tillage is weed destruction; there is another service in cultivation which is daily being proved still more important. I mean the mulching and lightening and aeration of the soil. But—as Kipling used to say—that's another story. There's full opportunity for a whole chapter about the value of tillage in keeping weeds down.

In pioneer days there was a saying along the frontier that the only good Injun was a dead Injun.

I never was much acquainted with the aborigines and am not qualified to debate that saying. But I'll make affidavit, if need be, to the fact that the only good weed is a dead weed.

Every decent New England housekeeper hates dirt. But what is dirt? Just matter out of place. Sawdust in the icehouse isn't "dirt." It's the essential thing for keeping ice and is worth more than yards of piano covers would be. But sawdust in the parlor on the piano is "dirt," because it doesn't belong there.

Similarly a weed is just a plant out of place. It may very well be that every plant which grows has a purpose all its own. This doesn't mean, in the old rural saying, that every plant is for some human use, if we only knew what. It's just a little bit cheeky for us men and women to assume that the only use in the universe for anything is a use we may be able to make of it. We aren't the whole thing, however important we may seem to ourselves. But, practically considered, when we are trying to raise a certain plant the use of which we do know and the fruit of which we can make serve us, any other plant which comes up and tries to jostle our protege out of its bed is a weed.

I grow asparagus in one garden and have to fuss with it, day in and day out, and year in and year out, to make it to its best. But when a stray shoot of asparagus starts up in my onion bed in another garden, I yank it out, instanter. Ie's a mighty useful plant where it belongs; it's a pesky weed among my onions.

The point is, that when you work hard to get a patch of ground ready, for corn, say—when you manure it and plow it and harrow it and mark it and hill-drop it and plant it and crow-string it and pay taxes on it, you want returns for what you've done in corn—not in quackgrass nor in pigweed nor in anything else in the whole vegetable kingdom. It's corn you're working for. Yet, before you planted your corn, nature had filled that soil full of about forty-seven kinds of weed-seed. And the minute you've finished your day's work and gone to supper, she sets herself to stealing as much as she can of your manure, etc., and steering it into something else than your crop. Go out there when the corn first pricks through the surface and get down on your hands and knees and squint over that ground, and you'll find that there are just about forty-seven other things up beside the corn. Leave the patch alone all summer, and it'll yield you about as big a crop of each one of these forty-seven weeds as of that corn.

Then is the time you have to get out your cultivator.

The things you don't want are just as ready to absorb the value of your soil preparation and just as hungry for your manure as the plants you do want. Let 'em alone and they'll take their full share—with a few spoonfuls over, to insure good measure. As most of us find that we can't well do but one thing at a time, so most soils can't produce more than one crop at a time. It must be either a crop of plants or a crop of weeds. Is can't often be both.

And it's up to Mr. Farmer, in every case, to say which it shall be.

Take this single case of corn, which I've been referring to. Leave out of consideration, for this occasion, and for the sake of keeping to one idea at a time, all thought of tillage just for the sake of tillage. Think only at this time of the need of destroying weeds—of keeping them from robbing your crop of the food you've furnished for its exclusive use.

Of course, as we've agreed, this sends you to get out the old cultivator, first thing. But how shall you use it? How often shall you use it? Shall you depend on it alone? Are you going to let the horse do it all, or are you going to use your own fingers—and brains, to polish up the job?

In these latter days, I find that a good many farmers rely wholly upon the horse and the cultivator-teeth. They "go over" their corn once, or twice, at the most, leave the cultivator at the end of the last row, turn out the horse and say: "Let her go at that; hain't got time to do no more."

Two years ago there died in Missouri a farmer who was in the habit of raising about a million bushels of corn every year on about 18,000 acres of land. If ever there was a man who might be thought to have too much land in corn to work it thoroughly, it was this chap. I've just been reading over his own account of the way in which he used to handle his 18,000 acres. The thing that impressed me most forcibly, in the whole story, was his way of cultivating. He was careful to get good seed, of course. He was particular about plowing and manuring—also of course. But it was after all this preliminary preparation had been completed and his corn planted that his real work of making a good crop developed. He harrowed his 18,000 acres thoroughly before the corn ever came up; always once and usually twice. Then he began cultivating as soon as he could, even if he had to have something like plaster dropped at intervals to show where the rows were. He cultivated as often and as thoroughly as possible. "Never less than four or five times, oftener if we can. Corn should be gone over with cultivator at least once a week."

Then, when the corn got well up, along in late July or early August, "go through the fields and pull out by hand every weed that was left."

Sometimes this Missouri farmer raised as much as 118 bushels of corn—ordinary commercial measurement, you understand; not to be compared with carefully dried and accurately weighed corn in a competition. He expected an average of about 35 bushels to the acre from all his fields, and every year. He was so careful about saving every bit of needless labor expense that he had special two row cultivators built for him, extra big and heavy, each requiring three mules to draw it. During the growing season he had over a hundred of these tools all the time at work. He chose them because they enabled fewer men to do the work and he wanted to save all the wage outgo he could.

Yet he found it worth his while, anxious as he was to avoid all unnecessary labor cost, to send his men through his 18,000 acre fields and pull, by hand, the weeds which the cultivators skipped.

I'm talking this now, because it seems a good time for you to figure out the way you'll treat that acre of corn which I hope you're planning to plant in The Bulletin's corn contest. This farmer out in Missouri—David Rankin was his name, and he was worth nearly $4,000,000 when he died, almost every red cent of it made from raising corn and feeding it to steers and hogs—this Missouri farmer wasn't trying to make a record or win a prize. He was simply doing corn farming, in the way he found most profitable.

Enter your name in The Bulletin corn contest, right now, and try a go at the Rankin way—if you haven't a better one of your own already cut and dried!

THE FARMER.

Mrs. Marguerite Springer, widow of Warren Springer, a Chicago millionaire, will use the estate in forming a social community for the industrial educational betterment of the crowded tenement section of Chicago.

A Bill Carrying a Special Appropriation of $150,000 for the expenses of maintaining the militia at Lawrence was reported yesterday by the Massachusetts house ways and means committee of the legislature.